NETZERO WATCH

NET ZERO, ADVERTISERS *and* THE THREAT TO FREE SPEECH

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Levi's
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MARKET
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The new super
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Executive summary

Net Zero fanaticism is found in unexpected places. Free speech is under assault by powerful adversaries.

In recent years, the global advertising industry has become a significant threat to free speech. To understand how and why, we need to recognize that legacy media audiences have fallen off a cliff. The public has abandoned daily newspapers and network television. As a direct result, advertisers have, as well.

Seventy cents out of every advertising dollar is now spent on the Internet – an environment that is more chaotic, fragmented, and risky than the old media model. Advertisers and the agencies that represent them have legitimate concerns about the nature of the content that appears next to their ads. But their proposed solutions have been arrogant and totalitarian.

While demanding ever-more granular control, advertisers have forgotten that the Internet is more than a marketplace for goods and services. It is also the public square, society's primary marketplace of ideas.

At the behest of advertisers, social media platforms are currently deleting and defunding videos, memes, and commentary that contradict mainstream narratives on many fronts, including climate change and Net Zero. Given free rein, they would engineer a bland Internet in which only the most innocuous, most conformist opinions were permitted. They would banish diverse worldviews and extinguish debate.

But corporations that earn billions each year marketing candy bars, ice cream, and sugary beverages to increasingly obese and diabetic young people have no business casting themselves as our moral superiors. They have no business policing what the rest of us say online.

Analysing Dashboard
Overview
68M
88K
View
64K
Like
6K
Comment
27K
Share

1. The long decline of traditional media

In 1950, when many families subscribed to more than one daily newspaper, total subscriptions exceeded the number of households in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.[1]

Then came television, with its nightly newscasts. Populations grew, but subscriptions failed to keep pace.

Over the sixty years that followed, the percentage of households paying for a daily newspaper in these countries declined at about the same rate. By 2017, less than fifteen percent of Canadian households 'got the paper'.[2] For decades, Americans had purchased sixty million daily newspapers, but by 2022 they bought a third of that number.[3]

Early on, television was broadcast free to everyone via antenna. For decades in America, three networks aired competing evening news shows: NBC, CBS, and ABC. In 2002, a majority of the public (56%) watched one of these regularly. By 2010, only 34% did.[4] In 2025, Nielsen viewership numbers indicate a mere 7% of US adults are tuning in.[5]

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of those surveyed in the UK in 2013 said they relied on BBC One for news.[6] Eleven years later that number had plunged thirty points to 43%.[7] There is every reason to believe viewers will continue to fade away over the next decade.

Ofcom, the UK telecommunications regulator, recently reported that a quarter of Britons – including half of those aged sixteen to twenty-four – 'do not watch broadcast TV on a weekly basis'.[8] The number of television shows that attract four million simultaneous viewers has dropped 52% since 2014, it says, while those attracting 'more than six million TV viewers fell by 82% over the same period'.[9]

Traditional TV broadcasters have faced a tsunami of competitors: cable TV stations offering specialized programming,[10] satellite television networks, streaming services such as Netflix (which launched in 2007 and 2012, in the US and UK respectively), and endless hours of free video on YouTube, TikTok, Meta, X, and other Internet-based platforms.

The audience for newspapers and television stations has declined precipitously. The influence of traditional media outlets over the broader culture has diminished. More critically for the purposes of this report, they have also been comprehensively defunded. The money has moved on.

Newspapers and TV networks have historically been heavily dependent on advertising revenue. Multinational corporations with big budgets are keen to advertise to as many people as possible. When hefty chunks of the population predictably watched national nightly news programs and read newspapers, launching a national ad campaign was relatively straightforward. But that time has passed.

Gone are the days in which advertisers could choose from multiple blockbuster TV shows. In late 1990s America, sitcoms such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends* regularly attracted twenty million viewers per episode,[11] while the medical drama *ER* attracted even more.[12] In contrast, during a randomly selected week in April 2024, the most watched primetime television show was *60 Minutes,* with 8.6 million viewers.[13]

In 1998, the year *Titanic* won Best Picture, more than fifty-seven million people watched the Oscars.[14] Over the next two decades, viewership reached forty million only about half the time.[15] The last occasion in which the Oscars exceeded twenty million viewers was 2020.[16]

In America, the football season is six months long. During the third week of October 2024, seven of the ten most-watched shows featured football and baseball – with NBC's *Sunday Night Football* leading the pack at 21.6 million and ABC's *Saturday Night Football* ranking tenth with 5.1 million.[17]

Fewer Americans are now watching baseball. A journalist observed in 2024 that the 'last four World Series were the four least-watched World

Series of all time', with an average audience of 9.1 million viewers per game. Forty-four million people watched the World Series in 1978, and the top ten most watched World Series occurred between 1975 and 1991.[18]

Since football remains a rare television bright spot, thirty-second Super Bowl ads sold for US$8 million in 2025. Peter Bray, the founder of an advertising agency, explained that businesses were willing to pay those rates because it's now 'very difficult to find a large audience'.[19] (Nielson says that event was viewed by a record-breaking 127.7 million people.[20])

Recent decades have been a nightmare for those who chase eyeballs for a living. Those eyeballs have scattered in a hundred directions across the Internet – where 70 cents out of every global advertising dollar is now spent (compared to 18 cents on television advertising and two to four cents each on newspaper, radio, and magazine ads).[21]

In the words of a senior executive in 2019: 'TV is now the Ottoman Empire. It is dying a slow death. Fifteen percent declines in reach in major markets.' How, he wondered, 'do you actually launch a campaign? There are fewer and fewer places to turn'.[22]

2. Online advertising, a new era

In simplified terms, the advertising industry performs two main tasks – developing ads and placing them. Employees are usually on either the 'creative' or the 'media buyer' side of the industry. While some agencies do both, others specialize.

Young adults aged eighteen to thirty-four are a prized advertising demographic. The young are impressionable, and a brand preference formed in one's youth can lead to decades of customer loyalty. (The habits of more mature consumers tend to be difficult to dislodge; they typically chose their laundry detergent and beer brands decades ago and feel no need to revisit the matter.)

Early on, Internet marketing was a bit like the Wild West. Everyone was exploring the new frontier, trying to figure out how it might serve their business interests. The first members of the public to flood online were young and tech savvy. Advertisers were keen to reach those people. But some advertising account managers were so eager to impress their clients with high audience numbers, they weren't as discerning as they might have been about where those ad dollars got spent (for example, on websites that specialized in pirated movie downloads or X-rated content).

Since websites are paid according to how many visitors see an ad (usually calculated per thousand), in the early days some fraction of website owners found ingenious ways to game the system and fraudulently juice their own earnings.

Ad-blocking software posed another challenge. Between 2010 and 2015, the number of Internet users employing mini software programs (known as browser extensions) to prevent ads from appearing on their screens increased eightfold.[23] Whenever ads don't display, advertisers miss out on eyeballs and websites earn less than expected.

'While investigating some advertising discrepancies', Sean Blanchfield explained in a 2015 report, 'we were shocked to discover that nearly 1 in 3 of our loyal visitors were blocking ads'.[24] Then the CEO of a Dublin, Ireland-based technology startup, he determined that the demographic most likely to do so was the one advertisers are most eager to reach: 'Websites that cater to young, technically savvy, or more male audiences are significantly worse affected.'[25]

Fake accounts have also been a thorn in the side of Internet advertisers. A 2017 research paper concluded that 'between 9% and 15% of active Twitter accounts are bots'.[26] This meant that corporations advertising on that platform had been paying to show ads to people who didn't exist.

Some advertisements have also appeared in

inappropriate places. In February 2017, *The Times* of London reported that ads from major brands were being shown before or during YouTube videos it described as promoting 'a violent pro-Nazi group, ISIS or hate speech from al-Qaeda preachers'. The article explained that such ads 'generally pay out between $5–$8 (£4–£6.40) per 1,000' views, with the revenue being split 55/45 between the person who uploads the video and YouTube. Marketing dollars from prominent brands, said the newspaper, could be ending up in 'the pockets of extremists'.[27]

In the aftermath of that article, multiple UK and US-based corporations yanked millions in YouTube advertising. *The Guardian* quoted researcher Alex Krasodomski-Jones: 'This marks a turning point for YouTube. For the first time, it's dealing not only with reputation damage but revenue damage.'[28]

Elsewhere, *The Guardian* helpfully explained: 'in the digital age many brands do not know exactly where their online advertising is running', since 'machines are largely responsible' for making these decisions. Ad campaigns, the article noted, used to 'be booked through sales teams and ad agencies picking up a telephone and striking a deal for where it would go, when it would run and how much it would cost'.[29] Now, prices are determined via an auction mechanism, and ads may get displayed in numerous online venues that advertisers have never heard of.

The day before Black Friday 2017, the most important shopping day of the year in the United States, the London *Times* (legacy media) once again exposed the shortcomings of new media (YouTube, owned by Google). On Twitter, the newspaper posted a photo of its upcoming front page, which declared in large type: 'Adverts fund paedophile habits. YouTube makes money from videos of undressed children.'[30]

The first paragraph told readers that 'Some of the world's biggest brands are advertising on YouTube videos showing scantily clad children that have attracted comments from hundreds of paedophiles.' Most of the videos, the article said, 'appear to have been posted by innocent children' who'd recorded themselves 'in underwear, doing the splits, brushing their teeth or rolling around in bed'. But third parties had added disturbing comments beneath the videos alluding to sexual abuse. Once again, large corporations pulled their ads off YouTube.[31]

Given all of the above, it's understandable that the now trillion-dollar advertising industry[32] has demanded guardrails and oversight. It's understandable that 'exclusion lists' were developed, in which advertisers specify – on a case-by-case basis – websites, categories, and keywords with which they don't wish their products to be associated.

Today, in 2026, advertisers fund the bulk of the Internet. It's therefore entirely appropriate that their perspective receive careful consideration. But the Internet belongs to everyone. In addition to being a marketplace for goods and services, it is also the public square – a place in which individuals of diverse ages, cultures, and political outlooks explore and debate all manner of ideas.

It's one thing to take steps to protect your own – and your clients' – reputation from truly unsavoury associations. It's another matter altogether for a powerful industry to demand a veto over what the public can say online.

3. Cleaning up social media's mess

A week-long event regularly takes place in Cannes, France in late June. Formerly known as the International Advertising Festival, it's now called the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity. Television commercials, along with print, digital, and other kinds of ads, are submitted beforehand, with winners awarded statues of gold, silver, and bronze lions at gala events.

On the first day of the 2018 festival, a public relations website ran a news story headlined: 'Consumers expect brands to clean up social media's mess.' It quoted Richard Edelman, CEO of the prominent marketing firm that bears his family's

surname. Based on polling commissioned by his company, Mr Edelman insisted members of the public expected brands 'to speak up' about bad things happening on the Internet.[33] In a video interview recorded in Cannes the same day, he said 'fake news is cancer in the bloodstream'.[34]

A blog post he published that morning likewise began with the declaration that 'Brands have become *the new hope* for consumers battered by populism, rapid change and societal discontent' (italics added). Claiming that 'Seventy percent of respondents told us that they expect brands to pressure platforms to address fake news and protect users from offensive content', Mr Edelmen advised advertisers to 'take on issues that matter, from racial discrimination to sustainability'.[35]

His audience was not the public at large. This was an ego-stroking sales pitch to the advertising sector, seeming to say, '*You are humanity's new hope. Your job is much bigger than selling products and services*.' Mr Edelmen is a leader and mentor in global marketing. A cohort of people who inhabit that world, young people in particular, presumably heard his message and felt they'd been given permission to become on-the-job-activists.

4. Advertising joins the climate crusade

A few months later, on Halloween 2018, Extinction Rebellion (XR) was officially launched via a protest held outside the UK Parliament. Fifteen-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, MP Caroline Lucas, and journalist George Monbiot were amongst those who, in the words of the XR website: 'declared a rebellion against the UK Government. *More than a thousand people then stepped out into the road to block traffic and shut down Parliament Square, causing gridlock across Central London*…Conscientious protectors of the earth also locked on to each other in the middle of the road to *further increase the disruption* and highlight the emergency' (italics added).[36]

XR – whose surprising links to the advertising industry are discussed below – articulated four demands. The government needed to strengthen climate policies, 'tell the truth about the ecological emergency we are in,' and form a new kind of 'fit for purpose' democracy by creating an entirely new 'national Citizen's Assembly.' This report will concern itself with XR's remaining demand: that legally binding measures be enacted 'to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025' – a mere seven years later.[37]

Behind the term *Net Zero* is a chain of suppositions, each of which is highly contestable. First, we need to agree that something *unusual* is happening with the climate. Many credentialed scientists are not convinced that this is the case.[38] Second, we need to agree that the alleged unusual phenomenon is *dangerous*. Again, many informed minds disagree.[39] Third, we need to believe the alleged unusual phenomenon is *primarily* the fault of humans (as opposed to natural forces we don't yet fully understand). Finally, we need to agree that there's only one viable response: slashing the greenhouse gas emissions that are generated by nearly every human activity, including breathing.

2025 – the year by which XR demanded UK emissions disappear – has now been and gone. In March 2025, the UK government released a document indicating the country generated 371 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions in 2024.[40] A graph reveals a steady decline over three decades, amounting to a halving of emissions since 1990. A slight dip in the overall trend line is evident in 2020, but even when COVID responses dramatically interrupted most people's lives, even when substantial numbers of commuters stopped going into the office and other kinds of travel flatlined, hundreds of millions of tonnes of UK emissions were still produced.[41]

XR's climate analysis is decidedly shallow. Net Zero by 2025 wasn't remotely achievable. But within a few short months this movement, which specializes in non-violent, attention-grabbing publicity stunts reminiscent of Greenpeace, be-

came a force to be reckoned with.

One of the reasons its activists might have felt so passionate on Halloween 2018 was a UN report announced three weeks earlier by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Neither the official press release[42] nor the Summary for Policymakers[43] used these specific words, but journalists concluded there were only a dozen years left to avert disaster.

A BBC headline said this was a 'Final call to save the world from "climate catastrophe"'.[44] The US-based *Smithsonian Magazine* declared: 'The world was just issued 12-year ultimatum on climate change.'[45] In the *Guardian*, economist Nicholas Stern agreed the situation was dire and that reducing emissions to Net Zero was the path to salvation.[46]

The seventeen-year-olds who were arrested during the XR protests[47] couldn't be expected to remember that the public had been inundated with similar warnings a decade prior. But they were poorly served by journalists who neglected to provide that critical historical context. (*Reuters* in March 2009*:* 'World faces last chance to avoid fatal warming: EU'[48] The *Guardian* in November 2009: 'We only have months, not years, to save civilisation from climate change.'[49] The UK *Telegraph* in December 2009: 'Copenhagen [climate] summit is last chance to save the planet, Lord Stern.'[50])

During late 2018 and early 2019, XR activists organized numerous disruptive protests. Eighty-five people were arrested after thousands gathered on five London bridges on a Saturday, rendering them impassable.[51] Smaller groups glued themselves to the gates of Downing Street, protested outside government offices by chaining themselves together, and defaced buildings with spray paint.[52] Others sat down in busy London intersections, blocking automobile and bus traffic on three successive days.[53] Four days before Christmas, a noisy protest took place outside the London headquarters of the BBC. According to *The Guardian,* parallel protests were held at BBC offices 'in Bristol, Glasgow, Cambridge, Birmingham, Truro, Sheffield, Bangor, and the broadcaster's Berlin bureau'.[54]

In January 2019, XR activists staged an hour-long sit-in at the Scottish Parliament after first posing as tourists.[55] In March they returned to Downing Street to pour fake blood on the pavement.[56] In April, police were called after the glass in the revolving door at Shell's London headquarters was shattered and graffiti was applied.[57] *The Guardian* reported that more than a thousand arrests were made over the course of eight days,[58] while *The Telegraph* reported police had run out of jail cells.[59]

The XR website describes the eleven days of protest that began on 15 April 2019 as a time in which the movement grew 'from a colourful group of fringe activists...into a household name and player on the world stage'.[60] On 30 April that year, representatives from XR gained an audience with the UK's Environment Secretary.[61] The following day, the UK Parliament symbolically declared a 'climate emergency'.[62]

XR recruited thousands of participants in a remarkably short period of time. Collectively, they demonstrated impressive levels of energy, creativity, and commitment. The protests were disruptive and annoying, but peaceful. Vandalism appears to have been minimal and atypical (it was another group, Just Stop Oil, that splashed tomato soup on a Van Gogh painting in late 2022).[63] There are no reports of police officers being injured while arresting or otherwise interfacing with XR protesters.

In retrospect, it seems reasonable to conclude that XR got so massive so quickly due partly to the assistance it received from the advertising world. Bizarrely, when XR released an open letter addressed to the top executives of that world in May 2019, industry professionals were on both sides of the conversation.

The Guardian reported that the letter had been 'written by Extinction Rebellion members with decades of experience of the advertising industry'. It quoted 'one of the authors' extensively, granting them anonymity.[64] Half a dozen years later, an advertising activist said of this open letter: 'It's a brilliant piece of copy. It's quite obvi-

ously written by an industry insider'.[65]

Individuals from the advertising world, therefore, weren't merely XR-adjacent; they were full-fledged participants. Marketers – commonly considered people who *mislead* and *spin* for a living – had now enlisted in the climate crusade. Under the auspices of XR, they promoted Net Zero while publicly chastising their own employers.

Here's how that open letter began: 'Dear Founders, CEOs [and so forth] of the advertising industry, You didn't think we'd forget about you?' Accusing the sector of 'selling things to people that they don't need,' the letter urged executives to 'Declare a climate & ecological emergency and act accordingly. Persuade *your clients* and their audiences to do the same' (italics added, client relationships are addressed below). The letter further implausibly insisted that advertisers had the ability to 'shift mass behavior in a heartbeat'.[66]

A few weeks after XR's open letter, its members disrupted the annual Cannes Lions gathering, resulting in fourteen arrests. *The Drum,* a marketing publication, reported that William Skeaping, whom it described as 'a former creative strategist at ad agency McCann London and a prominent player within Extinction Rebellion' had 'been meeting advertising execs throughout this week in Cannes. He has been attempting to persuade them to get on board the sustainability agenda in light of a prediction from the UN that we only have 12 years left to limit climate change disaster.' Asserting it was the responsibility of advertisers to 'wake everyone up', Mr Skeaping threatened to return to Cannes 'next year with 10,000 people'.[67]

The Drum's coverage of these events points to a recent column by the founder of a London ad agency titled 'How to solve climate change's branding problem.' The advertising sector, the author declared, must 'support the progressives by using appropriately scary climate terminology…We need to make the destruction of our planet's ecosystems sound absolutely terrifying, the solution achievable and the *participation in that solution mandatory*' (italics added).[68]

Cue the emergency sirens. Persuasion is morally acceptable. Coercion is not. When participation in any philosophy becomes *mandatory,* free speech vanishes and totalitarianism descends.

Two weeks after the 2019 Cannes Lions festival, twenty ad agencies publicly announced they would no longer do business with fossil fuel companies. An unspecified number of individuals also declared they would 'simply not work on fossil fuel client briefs, no matter which agency we are with.' The people involved explicitly thanked Extinction Rebellion for inspiring them, for providing 'the nudge'.[69]

5. Net Zero fever spreads

Thereafter, Net Zero fever spread throughout the advertising world. Campaigns and declarations multiplied. Marketers have a nose for the latest, hottest trend. Saving the planet was now it. (Mr Edelman, remember, had laid the groundwork a year earlier by urging the industry to 'take on issues that matter', by telling young recruits they were humanity's new hope.)

America's Ad Council announced in September 2019 that more than '60 leaders from across the media, marketing and advertising industries' had now 'pledged to tackle the challenge of rallying the public'. Calling global climate change 'an urgent threat to humanity', these executives promised to 'engage *our employees* and…push ourselves and *our clients* to make immediate plans to get to zero emissions' (italics added).[70]

Being lectured about greenhouse gases by their boss isn't how many people would define a professional workplace. Moreover, an inversion of the traditional client-agency relationship was being proposed. In the normal course of affairs, the client – who pays the bills – tells ad agencies what to do, not vice versa.

The Ad Council's press release referred readers to *The Future is Calling* website, where executives

were invited to join the list of 'leaders pledging to answer the call on climate change'.[71] There we find the then CEO of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, and the then Chief Revenue Officer of Facebook, David Fischer. Two of the most world's important social media companies had officially signed up to Net Zero. So had Condé Nast and Penske Media Corporation. Between them, these entities own some of the oldest and most influential magazines in America, including *Billboard*, *GQ, Hollywood Reporter, The New Yorker, Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair, Vogue,* and *Wired*.

The same day the climate pledge was announced, online retailer Amazon publicized a climate pledge of its own. In a brief video posted to Twitter, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos explained that the goal was to meet the Paris Net Zero targets ten years early (by 2040 rather than 2050). In his words, 'we know we can do it, and we know we have to do it.'[72]

Roughly twenty-four hours after those events in America, a UK marketing magazine reported: 'Today, the creative industry took to the streets of London to join the Global Climate Strike.' Among those taking part, it said, were employees of prestigious, award-winning ad agencies such as Ogilvy and Widen Kennedy who 'brought placards and signage designed…to support the movement and amplify the emergency message'.[73]

The article was accompanied by a video comprised of short clips. Footage of the protest is interspersed with comments by two marketers, one of whom talks about 'climate justice for all'. The last thing viewers see in this video – produced by a marketing magazine, about ad industry personnel – is an Extinction Rebellion flag.[74]

Ad Net Zero

In 2020, an initiative called 'Ad Net Zero' was launched by three UK entities: the Advertising Association, the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, and the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers.[75] Aimed at reducing the carbon footprint of the sector, the campaign soon spread to North America, the EU, and beyond.[76]

When the Global Ad Net Zero Summit 2021 was held in Glasgow during the UN's annual climate conference, media outlets such as *The Guardian, The Independent, The Evening Standard* and Channel 4 were prominent sponsors.[77] Amongst the speakers addressing that summit were representatives of the Advertising Standards Authority, Google, Meta (Facebook), and PepsiCo – along with the chief reporter for *The New Scientist* and the UK industry minister.[78] A more overt demonstration of the elites getting into bed together is difficult to imagine. Multinational corporations, regulators, online giants, government officials, and journalists all earnestly reinforcing each other's climate groupthink.

Ad Net Zero offers a ten-hour online training program that culminates in an Ad Net Zero Essentials certificate.[79] This training encourages advertising professionals to 'become genuine agents of change and positive action'. Companies that promote this course are said to be demonstrating their climate commitment and ensuring their workforce has 'an up-to-date understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing our industry on the path to Net Zero.'[80]

The F-List blacklist

'Ad agencies step away from oil and gas in echo of cigarette exodus', announced a *New York Times* headline in early 2021.[81] The article quoted the CEO of an ad agency who framed his company's pledge to reject work from oil and gas producers, utility companies, or their lobbyists as a 'moral decision' and a 'no-brainer'.

This pledge was the brainchild of CleanCreatives.org. Their website tells us 'We are strategists, creatives, and industry leaders who believe that fossil fuel clients represent a threat to our shared future. Over 1000 agencies have pledged to not work with fossil fuel clients.'

A major portion of that website is known as the F-List, where the dominant graphic is a photograph from the set of *Mad Men,* the acclaimed television series about the 1960s New York city advertising world. Judged by modern standards, that world was ethically suspect.[82]

The F-List page explains that ad agencies now working with fossil fuel clients 'remain stuck in the Mad Men era, ignoring the impact of their work for polluters…The 2024 F-List shares 1010 fossil fuel contracts held by 590 ad and PR agencies in 2023–2024…Mad Men no longer rule Madison Avenue, and climate madness must end. Clean agencies who reject fossil fuel clients are the future.'

Further down the web page, we read that: 'Young talent knows exactly who is responsible for the climate emergency. [Marketing company Stagwell Inc.] reports that "60% of Gen Z believe that oil and gas companies knowingly lied to the public about the climate impact of fossil fuels and ought to be punished for it".'

6. GARM and brand safety

In 2019, at the Cannes Lions festival, a controversial new entity was born: the Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM). During the five years of its existence, GARM attracted the close attention of the Judiciary Committee of the US House of Representatives, which monitors unlawful business collusion.

The Judiciary Committee has published two reports critiquing this entity. The first is titled *GARM's Harm: How the World's Biggest Brands Seek to Control Online Speech*.[83] It explains that GARM is a child of the World Advertising Federation, whose 'members represent roughly 90% of global advertising spend'.

GARM 'includes every major advertising agency holding company', the report continues. Its Steer Team (analogous to a board of directors, yet closely involved in daily operations), encompasses not only 'the world's largest media buying agency', but also four large corporations – Unilever, Mars, Diageo, and Procter & Gamble – 'that spend billions annually on advertising'.[84]

While GARM insisted its primary concern was 'harmful content' online, in the opinion of the Committee, 'GARM appears to have anti-democratic views' with respect to 'fundamental American freedoms'.[85]

The Judiciary Committee said GARM had coordinated various actions 'to eliminate the monetization, and in effect existence, of certain voices online.' After GARM recommended its members cease advertising on Twitter, for example, ad revenue fell 80% below forecasts.[86] The Committee further reported that GARM had 'threatened Spotify over alleged misinformation on Joe Rogan's podcast', after 'Mr. Rogan stated an opinion that young, healthy people need not receive the COVID-19 vaccine'.[87]

GARM had also 'discussed a strategy of blocking certain news outlets like Fox News, The Daily Wire, and Breitbart News…Additionally, GARM pushes its members to use news rankings organizations, like the Global Disinformation Index (GDI) and NewsGuard, that disproportionately label right-of-center news outlets as so-called misinformation.'[88]

The Judiciary Committee's second report – *Exporting Censorship: How GARM's Advertising Cartel Helped Corporations Collude with Foreign Governments to Silence American Speech*[89] – says this entity 'pressured social media companies to remove content despite knowing that its efforts were unwanted by American consumers. According to GARM's own documents, Gallup polling showed that 66 percent of American consumers *valued free expression over protection from harmful content* during the same period GARM was engaging in its coordinated behavior' (italics added).[90]

The Committee documented how 'voluntary standards' developed by GARM for its own members didn't stop there. Soon, in partnership with European Union regulators, it was pushing for those standards to become mandatory and universal.[91] The committee concludes that, 'under the misguided banner of brand safety' GARM undermined the civil liberties of Americans.[92]

In August 2024, Mr Musk's Twitter (renamed X Corp.) filed a lawsuit against the World Feder-

ation of Advertisers and others, alleging that GARM had conspired to organize an illegal advertising boycott.[93] Three days later, GARM announced it was disbanding.[94]

The Judiciary Committee's second report reproduces extensive internal emails written by GARM's leader, Rob Rakowitz. In one, he talks about applying 'full pressure' to social media platforms 'to follow-thru on *all* GARM priorities' (italics added). Facebook, he says, should not be able to 'pick and choose' what actions to take.[95]

A month after Mr Musk became Twitter's new owner, Mr Rakowitz characterized the reinstatement of (then) former US President Donald Trump's account on Twitter as 'a complete 180 on commitments made to advertisers' during various meetings. Whether or not that claim is accurate, the clear implication is that a man who'd just paid $44 billion to acquire Twitter wasn't supposed to determine Mr Trump's status on his own. GARM expected to 'be informed and consulted' beforehand.[96]

In another email, Mr Rakowitz advises the head of the World Advertising Federation he will be secretly listening in on a telephone conversation between Mr Musk and WPP, the world's largest advertising agency.[97] Rather odd behaviour in an organization that talked so much about integrity in the context of social media.[98]

In a November 2022 email, Mr Rakowitz tells Julie Inman Grant, Australia's eSafety Commissioner, he's 'writing a piece now on how brand safety has nothing to do with controlling freedom of speech and everything to do with correcting an imperfect marketplace…I'm getting tired of the false debates.'[99]

But that article, which appeared five days later on the World Federation of Advertisers website,[100] falls short. Rather than formulating a coherent argument, it simply declares that brand safety is 'everything but' an attack on free speech. It illogically equates protecting advertisers with empowering consumers. It conflates brand safety with community safety. It tells skeptics they are misinformed and advises them to 'engage and learn'. Brand safety for advertisers, Mr Rakowitz further declares, 'is non-negotiable'.[101]

This is an extreme version of the old saw that 'What's good for General Motors is good for America'. In a free society, it is freedom of speech that is non-negotiable. We need free speech far more than we need to make life easier for marketers who advertise pet food and toilet tissue on the Internet.

Consumers are *not* empowered when what they say online is aggressively monitored, policed, and restricted at the behest of advertisers. Brand Safety, in this context, is actually Brand Privilege; it amounts to big businesses writing rules for the rest of us. Society is supposed to regulate the advertising industry, not the other way around.

The closest Mr Rakowitz comes to presenting evidence is when he declares the tragic suicide of a UK teenager 'preventable'. If only proper safeguards had been in place, he implies.

But the coroner's conclusion in that instance was more nuanced. He said the fourteen-year-old girl had 'subscribed to a number of online sites' and 'had access to images, video clips and text concerned with self-harm and suicide or that were otherwise *negative or depressing in nature*…It is *likely* that the above material viewed by [her], *already suffering with a depressive illness and vulnerable due to her age,* affected her mental health in a negative way and contributed to her death in a more than minimal way' (italics added).[102]

Youth suicide is a serious social problem that breaks hearts and fractures families. But there are other ways to address it. Attempting the impossible task of cleansing the Internet of material that might negatively influence depressed teenagers is not a viable solution.

It's worth noting that, prior to leading GARM, Mr Rakowitz was a senior executive[103] with the multi-national corporation, Mars Inc. – the world's leading candy bar manufacturer.[104] Unilever, a central player in GARM, sells ice cream. PepsiCo, another member, sells sugary carbonated beverages and potato chips. Coca-Cola was also a member.

Many young people overconsume candy bars, ice cream, sugary beverages, and potato chips to the detriment of their health. Millions of children around the world are obese, and childhood Type 2 diabetes is on the rise. The earlier someone becomes diabetic, the higher their chances of going blind later in life or losing a limb to amputation.[105]

In the marketing world, it is well understood that the most effective way to increase sales is to encourage already-existing, high-volume customers to consume more. (Acquiring new customers is, by comparison, relatively difficult.) Mr Rakowitz thought the Internet should be more tightly regulated following a teenager's suicide. Yet GARM's members earn billions each year selling junk food to already obese youngsters. It is absurd and obscene that these corporations imagined themselves to be our moral superiors, that they considered themselves entitled to police the rest of us.

In a GARM report, YouTube admits to a blanket policy that prevents climate skeptics from earning revenue: 'In October 2021,' wrote YouTube, 'we expanded our *Advertiser-friendly Guidelines* to address Climate Change misinformation, prohibiting the monetization of content that *contradicts well-established scientific consensus* around the existence and causes of climate change' (italics added).[106] YouTube doesn't believe we should vigorously debate what's supposed to be the world's most pressing problem. Its top priority is being advertiser-friendly.

In another GARM report, Pinterest discusses 'a policy we rolled out in April 2022 to keep false and misleading claims around climate change off the platform.'[107] Along with adult sexual services and graphic violence, 'climate misinformation' is one of fifteen categories of content that gets deactivated by Pinterest, a website that attracts approximately as many monthly users as X (approaching 600 million).[108]

7. Climate catechism

Groups and individuals within the advertising industry have, in recent years, taken it upon themselves to define 'climate misinformation.' Harriet Kingaby has been recognized by *Forbes* as one of '43 people changing advertising for the climate.'[109] She was a guest speaker at the 2025 Cannes Lions festival and, in 2023, addressed a UN human rights forum.[110] Her LinkedIn profile describes her as a thought leader working 'at the intersection of advertising, human rights and climate change.' It says she's widely 'recognized for her work on climate change misinformation' and has 'deep knowledge' in this area.[111]

Ms Kingaby is also a co-founder of the Conscious Advertising Network (CAN) which – in partnership with the more brazenly activist Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) – released a 72-page report in late 2022.[112] Titled *The Impacts of Climate Disinformation on Public Perception* it tells us an online public opinion survey was conducted in six countries during October 2022 – Australia, Brazil, Germany, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Respondents were asked questions about Net Zero, heat pumps, renewable energy, and electric cars.

After tabulating the answers to these questions, the report concludes: 'When the data is combined, between 55% and 85% of the populations surveyed believe at least one of the climate change misinformation statements included in the questionnaire.'[113] (The fact that the questionnaire itself doesn't appear in the report is a red flag, since a poll can't be properly evaluated without it.)

According to this report, climate misinformation 'runs rampant all over the world and hinders climate action'. The unnamed authors of this report believe members of the public who answered questions 'incorrectly' haven't formed sincere opinions based on firsthand experience, independent reading, or professional expertise (some may well work in the sciences). Rather, they are hapless victims who've been duped by 'deliberate anti-climate communication attacks in the public space.'

Climate misinformation, says this report, 'no longer simply refers to outright climate denialism.' Rather, unnamed 'professional climate disinformation producers' are allegedly presenting 'more reasonable-seeming arguments' that lead people astray – for example, by raising concerns about free speech.[114]

CAAD's sweeping 'universal definition of climate *dis*information and *mis*information' (italics added) is presented at the beginning of this report. According to that definition, anyone who says it's impossible to know what percentage of climate change is caused by human beings versus what percentage is caused by the sun is a misinformation spreader. It is, evidently, verboten to *undermine* (*aka* discuss intelligently rather than dogmatically) the existence of climate change, the impacts of climate change, or 'the unequivocal human influence on climate change'.

Any individual who disputes that an 'IPCC scientific consensus' exists (about what isn't specified) is spreading disinformation. Anyone who doubts there's a 'scientific consensus on mitigation or adaptation' is spreading disinformation. So is anyone with the temerity to question a wholly political instrument – the international treaty known as the Paris Climate Agreement.

Any individual who 'Misrepresents scientific data, including by omission or cherry-picking, in order to erode trust in climate science, climate-focused institutions, experts, and solutions' is likewise guilty.

We also learn that the climate disinformation label is being wielded as a weapon in policy disputes. People who believe natural gas can play a helpful transitional role (since it is less emissions-intensive than coal) are, according to this report, disinformation spreaders.[115]

In their 'Background' discussion, the report authors categorize natural gas as a 'polluting technology.' Ergo, they say, it's fraudulent to claim this energy source can be 'supportive of climate goals *despite clear guidance from the International Energy Agency that we can't build any new fossil fuel infrastructure if we want to hit 1.5 degrees warming*' (italics added).[116]

The authors likely meant to say: 'if we *don't want to exceed* 1.5 degrees warming.' But the larger point is that they appear to regard the International Energy Agency, which is governed by politicians and bureaucrats,[117] as the final word. Close your eyes, insist these disinformation police. Narrow your mind and submit to the higher wisdom of the International Energy Agency, the IPCC, and the UN climate body that negotiated the Paris treaty. Thou shalt not erode trust in climate experts.

On pages 31 to 34, we learn that survey respondents were presented with six statements about Net Zero. Here's the one the report considers true: 'The world needs to rapidly de-carbonise and achieve net-zero by 2050 to ensure the prosperity and welfare of humans across the world.'

Anyone who agreed with one of the other statements was simply parroting 'misinformation narratives.' Here are two of them: 'The main reason our bills are increasing is due to climate and net-zero policies' and 'Net-zero and climate policies will increase poverty and unemployment.'

Between 45% and 72% of the people surveyed across six countries chose an answer the report authors consider unacceptable. No matter their personal experience, no matter what the circumstances might be in their corner of their country, according to the authors of this report such opinions are nothing more than climate misinformation. Amongst Australians, we're advised, 'the belief that Australia cannot afford to reach the target of net zero emissions by 2050 was the most common piece of misinformation around net zero, with 29% reporting this statement was true'.

In all six nations surveyed, roughly half or more of the population agreed with a 'misinformation' answer with respect to Net Zero (the percentage ranged from 45 percent in the UK to 72 percent in India). Let us remember that climate misinformation gets deleted on Pinterest and demonetized on YouTube. Let us remember that advertisers who've conspicuously embraced Net Zero don't want their ads running next to

climate misinformation. Any online architecture in which advertisers are permitted to define misinformation would, in fact, banish from the public square the opinions of up to three quarters of the public.

This report inadvertently yet brilliantly demonstrates the anti-democratic nature of disinformation crusades. The truth doesn't get elevated. Authentic, meaningful, wide-ranging conversations don't take place. Rather, genuine human voices are suppressed in favour of a third party's narrow agenda.

One of the strangest aspects of this report is that, except for the passing references to the International Energy Agency, the IPCC, and the Paris treaty discussed above, its authors make no attempt to defend their positions. There are no footnotes in this report. No published research is cited. The same people who claim to care about scientific data being cherry-picked and omitted don't bother to cite any scientific data at all.

The individuals involved appear to have decided unilaterally – perhaps over too many glasses of wine – what is true and what is false. *Anyone who disagrees with me is a disinformation spreader* appears to be the threadbare premise of this far-from-impressive document.

Before we put it behind us, here are some additional statements its authors consider clear instances of misinformation:

A significant number of scientists disagree on the cause of climate change. (page 14)

Climate models are not accurate. (p. 14)

We should focus our efforts on technologies such as carbon capture and storage rather than trying to cut carbon emissions. (p. 14)

Abandoning oil and gas would condemn poor people to hardship and block their right to modern livelihoods. (p. 19)

Renewable energy is more expensive than energy from fossil fuels. (p. 23)

Transitioning toward wind and solar energy will be damaging to the economy. (p. 23)

Heat pumps cost more to run than a gas boiler. (p. 35)

The batteries from electric vehicles cannot be reused or recycled, so will pollute the environment. (p. 38)

8. Exposing the censorship machine

Four months after Mr Musk acquired Twitter with the stated intention of transforming it into an island of free speech surrounded by an ocean of online censorship, journalist Michael Shellenberger submitted nearly seventy pages of written testimony to a committee of the US House of Representatives. That alarming testimony documents numerous ways in which US government bodies have funded censorship in recent years, despite a hardline prohibition against such behaviour in the US Constitution.[118]

Machinery initially put in place to monitor terrorism and extremism, says Mr Shellenberger, was later aimed at alleged misinformation. That machinery restricts the speech of US citizens on a variety of issues, he says, including climate change, renewable energy, and fossil fuels.

Mr Shellenberger explains that a vast array of NGOs, think tanks, and academic departments have hired small armies of people to monitor the Internet for opinions that deviate from dominant, mainstream narratives. 'It is important to understand how these groups function', he says. 'They are not publicly engaging with their opponents in an open exchange of ideas. They aren't asking for a national debate over the limits of the First Amendment. Rather, they are creating blacklists of disfavored people and then pressuring, cajoling, and demanding that social media platforms censor, deamplify, and even ban the people on these blacklists.' We know, he says, 'that the US government has funded organizations that pressure advertisers to boycott news media organizations and social media platforms'.

In Mr Shellenberger's view, the censorship machine has 'defined harm so broadly' that the suppression of fully accurate information is now justified in the name of supposedly higher objectives – for example shutting down online discussions about adverse reactions to COVID vaccines so as to prevent general vaccine hesitancy. 'Their goal, clearly, is not protecting the truth', he says, but promoting a particular worldview.

Mr Shellenberger – whom *Time* magazine designated as a Hero of the Environment back in 2008[119] – says he has experienced censorship firsthand. In 2020, he wrote an article about his just-published book, *Apocalypse Never: Why Environmental Alarmism Hurts Us All.* In response, he says, 'multiple think tanks quickly and falsely claimed to have "debunked" its contents. Those fake debunkings became the basis for Facebook to censor my posts, even ones that don't have [anything] to do with climate change, to this day. Facebook allowed no way for me to appeal.'

Colleagues have likewise been suppressed, he says. 'In response to a lawsuit brought by journalist John Stossel, Facebook confessed that its so-called 'fact-checking' of him and me could not be considered defamation as it was merely an "opinion"'. (This echoes what happened when Greenpeace got sued. Its lawyers insisted the public is well aware that Greenpeace's views are merely opinion and interpretation rather than 'hard news.')[120]

Stossel explains he made a video arguing that while California wildfires had been exacerbated by climate change, they were 'mostly caused by poor government management. Facebook censored that as "misleading".[121] Subsequently, he says, he asked reviewers at Science Feedback – to whom Facebook had outsourced its factchecking – about that label. 'Two agreed to on-camera interviews. When I asked what was misleading about my video, they surprised me by saying that they hadn't even watched [it]!'

Although he notified Facebook, 'No luck. Facebook's refusal to acknowledge its mistake hurts me because when Facebook fact-checks something, its algorithm makes sure fewer people see that video.'

In another video, *Are We Doomed?* Mr Stossel took the position that 'climate change is real… but we can adapt to it'. He says it received 24 million views on Facebook before the platform labeled it 'partly false' and throttled it. 'Views for my other videos on Facebook dropped, too', he explains. 'I still get millions of views via YouTube, Rumble, etc., but I used to get most of my views from Facebook. No more. I asked a Science Feedback reviewer what was wrong with my climate-crisis video, and he admitted that he and his other factcheckers found no incorrect facts…' The problem is the omission of contextual information rather than specific 'facts' being wrong,' he said.'[122]

In other words, Facebook factcheckers are in the business of narrative control. In other fields, it's normal for experts to reach starkly different conclusions after examining the same facts.[123] But on Facebook, only a narrow band of climate interpretations are permitted.

Mr Shellenberger mentions Facebook's censoring of 'Bjorn Lomborg for accurately reporting that the British medical journal *Lancet* found that warmer temperatures save lives.'[124] Mr Lomborg presents his own account of those events in a blog post titled 'The heresy of heat and cold deaths.'[125] Climate Feedback, he says, 'simply made up a false statement,' attributed it to him, and then announced he'd made 'unsupported claims.'[126] These factcheckers have 'no good arguments,' he writes, 'and yet they pillory my work publicly in an attempt to censor data they deem inconvenient.' In his view, expecting Facebook to address these matters is pointless.

Returning to Mr Shellenberger's testimony, he says he has read 'hundreds of pages of justifications' for censorship in general and 'for specific censorship efforts'. His conclusion is that unsophisticated thinkers abound. In that arena, he says, 'Something is either true or false in the same way that something is black and white… The problem is many of the issues that the censorship industrial complex wants to censor aren't obviously "true" or "false"'.

He continues: 'Censorship ideology holds that the censors are able, at least better than most people, to determine the truth and falsity of something and the intention of the person or organizations [who uttered it]. As such, censorship ideology is fundamentally elitist…Calling oneself a "disinformation expert" is like calling oneself a "truth expert". It is naive, grandiose, and hubristic.'

9. Net Zero fanaticism and UN totalitarianism

The webpage for the F-List blacklist, mentioned above,[127] cites a speech by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the American Natural History Museum in June 2024,[128] declaring, with seemingly nary a thought for how his remarks might distress impressionable children, that humans 'are playing Russian roulette with our planet' and that we 'need an exit ramp off the highway to climate hell'.

He called fossil fuel companies 'the godfathers of climate chaos', that have historically 'been aided and abetted by advertising and PR companies'. Remember the TV series, he warned. Today's ad agencies are modern day *Mad Men* 'fuelling the madness'.

Although in possession of the relevant data, Mr Guterres chose not to confront the obvious. In that speech he told us 'global emissions need to fall 9 per cent every year until 2030 to keep the 1.5-degree limit alive.' Yet, he said, 'they are heading in the wrong direction. Last year they rose by 1 per cent.'

Just as Extinction Rebellion's demand for Net Zero by 2025 was patently unrealistic, there is likewise no reason to believe a dramatic emissions turnaround of this magnitude will occur within the next five years. Mr Guterres is not a teenaged XR protester. He is a grown man who knows very well this won't happen. Yet he still tried to frighten us into a frenzy. He demanded that we do more and spend more to advance his Net Zero preoccupation. That behaviour makes him a threat to everyone's civil liberties.

Let us remember that this gentleman was appointed by the UN bureaucracy. The public did not elect him, and has no mechanism to remove him. Yet he behaves as though he is a legitimate leader with a solid mandate to meddle in all corners of our lives and economy.

In that speech, Mr Guterres used the word *must* 22 times – as in, 'Every country must deliver and play their rightful part' and 'Every city, region, industry, financial institution and company must also be part of the solution.' That is totalitarian language. If Mr Guterres ruled the planet, all other considerations would be consigned to the back of the bus, all other norms would be sacrificed on the altar of Net Zero.

During that speech, he further used the word *need* 19 times. As in, 'we need to act on every front,' 'we need to fight harder,' and 'we need maximum ambition, maximum acceleration, maximum cooperation.'

Whatever happened to the voting public, in their respective countries, deciding for themselves what must be done, and what they need? Whatever happened to free people choosing their own path and setting their own priorities?

Mr Guterres called for 'solidarity levies on sectors such as shipping, aviation and fossil fuel extraction – to help fund climate action.' He said banks should cease funding fossil fuel projects, that ad agencies should stop assisting them, and that every nation should ban them from advertising.

More taxes. More regulations. More structural discrimination. More prohibited speech. That's not a thriving and free world, inhabited by a thriving and free populace. It's a dystopia in which large portions of the public – including non-conforming journalists – are endlessly fact-checked, demonetized, censored, and deleted.

Net Zero fanaticism is a profound threat to free speech. It is a blight on this planet, a dense fog seeping into every nook and cranny, blanketing everything, conscripting everyone – including our children.

Net Zero needs to be banished, exiled, cast out.

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The Net Zero and Liberty project

This paper is the first publication in our series *Net Zero and Liberty*, which seeks to explain the dedevelopment of political and economic liberty in the west has been inextricably linked to energy, and how decarbonisation policies threaten to erode many of our hard-won freedoms.

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